

BOOK REVIEW

Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism by Sam Rose

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A book review of Sam Rose, *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. 208 pp. ISBN 9780271082387.

In view of the current progress of what has been named the ‘visual turn’ or the ‘pictorial turn’,¹ it is exciting to witness Sam Rose’s return to early aesthetic formalist-modernism, which was so passionate about the medium, its appearance, and visibility. Rose’s project shares a recent inclination to think anew the advent of aesthetic modernism.² It is founded on the presumption that visual art ought to be – and actually has always been – theoretically subsumed under one meta-project. This meta-project does not necessarily have a clear telos, but it does have a history. In support of this view, Rose appeals to Stanley Cavell’s claim that ‘only masters of a game, perfect slaves to that project, are in a position to establish conventions which better serve its essence. This is why deep revolutionary changes can result from attempts to conserve a project, to take it back to its idea, keep it in touch with its history’ (p. 155).

According to Rose’s post-formalist view, the idea of art’s meta-project is the *idea of form*. However, beyond the traditional formalist definition of form as the aesthetically significant arrangement of elements and their interrelations, Rose refers to form as communicative embodied vision and visibility. Accordingly, form-based criticism moves ‘from the artist’s vision of the forms in the work into the artist’s vision of the scene – and from the artist’s vision of the scene into the worldview or visibility embodied in the work as a whole’ (p. 5). The visual turn in current philosophy of art goes hand in hand with the decreasing influence of the linguistic turn. In aesthetics, the linguistic turn, influential from the 1960’s onward, was particularly hostile to formalism. However, the linguistic and subsequent cognitivist approaches to the visual sphere have proved insufficient and overly reductionist when it comes to providing a deep understanding of the visual sphere as a field of the analysis of visibility. They overlook the aesthetic aspect of the visual sphere, art and design included, as well as the forms that organize it. Insofar as they address form at all, they characterize it as subjugated to either language or cognitive value. As Rose explains, during the linguistic

¹ Benedek András and Nyíri Kristóf, *Vision Fulfilled: The Victory of the Pictorial Turn* (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2019).

² Michalle Gal, *Aestheticism: Deep Formalism and the Emergence of Modernist Aesthetics* (Bern: Lang, 2015).

phase, 'alternative and deliberately non-aesthetic sciences of art came to the fore, cleaving art history from aesthetics in a manner that has never been fully resolved' (p. 63).

Other attacks on formalism, Rose notes, came from realist and Marxist theoreticians of art, such as Anthony Blunt and Francis Klingender, whose 'fear of the aesthetic' (p. 65) led to a dismissal of the commitment to form, considered as inauthentic and detached from life and society. According to neo-Marxist aesthetics, the development of formal properties was driven by the means of production rather than by aesthetics and visibility. However, according to Rose, it was this very context that endowed formalism its status as the magisterial framework of aesthetic discourse:

The neglect of aesthetics left mainstream formalist criticism to seize the future of the understanding of art even as formalism received many of its [...] critiques – from Marxist historians [...]. Art criticism expanded on the process begun in the 1920s and '30s where, for the first time, formalism was brought to 'the people' and turned into a general, rather than simply elite, mode of artistic appreciation. (p. 67)

Nonetheless, neo-Marxists, realists, and linguistic scholars 'ignored the basic expressive, communicative, and deeply humanist thrust of formalist art' (p. 118). Their history of art was thus 'a direct reversal of the formalist history constructed by Roger Fry' (p. 115).

Fry, the well-known formalist philosopher of art and design, curator, and artist, is the protagonist of Rose's narrative. Fry is 'the figure who had taught his generation the truth about the intrinsic connections between art and the wider world' (p. 102), whose theory of postimpressionism 'was really a general theory of modern art' (p. 130). Hence, having witnessed the idea of form being revealed over a period stretching from early formalist modernism until the end of the linguistic age, it is our prerogative to revisit the formalist approach to the visual segment of our ontology. But this time we must do so in order to decipher its *durability*.

Rose's study is timely and indispensable, especially when it employs methods from the history of ideas. *Art and Form* goes back and forth between an atypical analysis of the concept of artistic form as a communicative unit and a historicist account of formalism. Both are developed with a keen eye on the respective challenges they faced. Rose promotes two parallel analytic-historicist claims, though sometimes rather artificially. According to the first, creative form is not as pure a phenomenon as (allegedly) claimed by Clive Bell. According to the second, formalism has never really been committed to a purist and materialist conception of 'form' but has a much broader and meaningful intentionalist and dualist conception. In Rose's view, formalism actually allows form to non-verbally communicate the vision of its maker, the maker's ways of seeing, and the creative process itself – all to be recreated by a successful viewer. This aim is formulated by Rose as follows:

By retrieving the communicative aspect and bringing it back into the moment of formalism's consolidation at the turn of the twentieth century, I show how the sensory and the formal were brought together to produce a criticism predicated on the intuitively felt life, the manifest purposefulness, that objects of human production exhibited and from which whole forms of life could be imaginatively reconstructed. (p. 10)

Structurally, the book is divided into two major parts, titled 'Art Writing' and 'Art and Life', which are interrelated only to some extent. Part 1 presents the early formalism of Bell, Fry, Bernard Berenson, A. C. Bradley, and Herbert Read, and then discusses some of its later stages, formulated by I. A. Richards and Clement Greenberg. Rose establishes here the idea of formalism as addressing form in order to betray the intentions and mental visions of the artists. Trying to refute the classification of formalism as materialism, Rose offers a somewhat forced

link between the formalist and contemporary idealist definitions of art such as those of R. G. Collingwood and Benedetto Croce. Following Arnaud Reid and Margaret Bulley, Rose argues that the idealist philosophers meet the formalist by rejecting 'form as mere shape' (p. 43).

The slight unnaturalness of Rose's justification for his account of modernist formalism as a theory of communicative rather than compositional form stems from his reading of Tolstoy. Rose argues for a similarity between Fry's and Tolstoy's definitions of art, setting aside Fry's assertion that Tolstoy's *What is Art* is 'perverse' as it promotes an anti-purist view 'and values the emotions aroused by art entirely for their reaction upon actual life' rather than upon imaginative life. Fry argues that since the works that Tolstoy sees as morally desirable are often artistically inferior, 'we must give up the attempt to judge the work of art by its reaction on life, and consider it as an expression of emotions regarded as ends in themselves'.³ Tolstoy's account of expression is mentalist, attributing a privileged status to mental emotional contents, which are delivered to the receiver's mind through subordinate external symbols. By contrast, Fry's formalist theory of expression is materialist, based on what he dubs 'the emotional elements of design', which 'are connected with essential conditions of our physical existence'.⁴ This is to say that, for Fry, expressivity originates in the external, and then dwells in the composition itself. The form, rather than the artist, is the expressive agent.

True, expressivity is motivated by the spirit of the form's maker. Rose is thus right to point out that Fry promoted postimpressionism because, while the naturalists aspired to portray perceptual sense data, 'the postimpressionists instead drew on inner mental or "conceptual" imagery' (p. 130). Still, formalists have never explained form by reference to the mental content of the maker. One should not overlook the formalist distinction between the communication of emotion and the showing of it in the medium itself. This characterization of artistic form as immune to an externally motivated goal to deliver messages is the real meeting point of modern formalist and modern idealist philosophy of art. Hence, there is a gap between the formalists on the one hand and Tolstoy, Collingwood, and Croce on the other. This gap is both ontological, pertaining to the divide between materialism and idealism, and epistemological, pertaining to the divide between externalism and internalism. Even Wollheim, who later suggested 'that style had psychological reality, embodying the physical and mental habits of the maker in the work' (p. 68), would fall on the latter side of the divide. The formalist philosophy of art was more externalist and ontologically oriented than is acknowledged in *Art and Form*.

Controversy aside, Rose's untraditional grouping of thinkers is nicely justified by his historical introduction of contemporary connoisseurship to his account of the theoretical zeitgeist, for the above-mentioned formalists were not just philosophers but also connoisseurs. They were deeply immersed in art and the iconography of artistic forms, well-versed in artistic visions, artworld activists, and experts in the oeuvre of different artists. This fact supports Rose's claim that they saw depth and ideas in artistic forms that also set forth the creative experiences of their creators. According to Rose, 'close attention to form was a means of ensuring that art writing could not only document rich experiences of the artwork but that this documentation would capture something of the artistic personality or intention – the historical experience – behind the work' (p. 51). A paradigmatic example of connoisseur philosophy is the brilliant study of Paul Cézanne's oeuvre by Fry, who curated the first exhibitions of the postimpressionists – a term coined by him. With great and enlightening attention to detail, Rose looks at Fry's dedication to Cézanne's forms, showing that

in its concern for contact with the inner lives of others, its desire to come to terms as honestly as possible with one's own experience, and the longing for a description

³ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), 18.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

of that personal experience that grounds communal enterprise, Fry's criticism [...] attempted to be as open to the world of human concerns as it thought it possible to be. (p. 61)

Thus, while Rose may take too lightly the deep structural divide that Fry draws between actual and imaginative life, his introduction of the context of connoisseurship is a lovely example of the contribution of historicism to aesthetics and the broader significance of Rose's book.

The second part of the book, 'Art and Life', while less tight than the first part, is no less insightful. It expands Rose's discussion of formalism by introducing two further topics: formalism in art and design in the face of theories of aesthetics of mass production and formalism in Eastern colonies, a chapter that would have merited a separate, book-length study. The second topic addresses formalism as an ethical-political school, to be subsumed under visual culture. The focus is on three subjects. These are (a) the viewer's aesthetic experience, (b) the work's relation to society, and (c) the controversy between Fry, Read, and other Marxists regarding the (in)ability of art which is mass produced or sensitive to industrial progress to possess high beauty. Rose nicely presents the formalist division between low and high culture as founded on creative processes and the viewer's proper experience. Pointing to the fact that 'form was central to modernist constructions of high and low culture' (p. 73), Rose convincingly argues that Fry's regulative or prescriptive ideas of viewing art were foundational for modernist high culture including design and craft.

The notions of 'proper experience' and a 'successful viewer', along with 're-creation of artistic activity', are central to the politics of formalism that Rose advocates, and closely related to the artwork's openness to the public. 'Re-creation' means an active viewing of artworks, which is characteristic of high culture, in contrast with the passive consumption of low culture. While the traditional view of modernist formalism sees it as promoting disinterested contemplation, Rose's portrayal of formalism proposes that formalism actually demands a responsive viewer: 'such aesthetics rejected passive spectatorship to instead model proper viewing as imaginative "re-creation"' (p. 81). Moreover, contrary to the traditional view of formalism, Rose argues that not only were formalist theory and art open to the viewer and society, but they even aspired to play a role in the distribution of power through visual education. For example, Greenberg portrayed Western industrialization as promoting kitsch, a mass-produced art that demands nothing but passive consumerism from its viewers. In contrast, avant-garde was an authentic art that called for active multi-stage contemplation and aimed at leading visual culture. Similarly, Read proposed a political view of what is usually considered apolitical, and a distinction between entertainment and art, endorsing a 'split between the positive nature of active engagement and the potentially harmful nature of passivity' (p. 85). However, Read supported an expansion of the visual environment to include new forms of mass-produced design, thus criticizing Fry's account.

Chapter 4 is, I think, the most significant part of the book, returning to the ideological feud between the art and craft movement, which promoted form-based beauty, and the industrial design movement, which introduced the idea of functional beauty. This feud was manifested in the tension that arose around Fry and his Bloomsbury Group's wish to attach art to design and craft. The group's difficulties in accepting the inauthenticity of mass production, as it doubted the ability of the machine to embody the handwriting of the individual maker, was protruding at the time: 'though it despised the moral pretensions and social prestige of the parent generation and hated the prevalent commercialism, it did not attempt to reconcile its own traditions of good taste and refinement with the necessary economic foundations of a new order of society' (p. 101). Certainly, while Fry popularized high culture, he did not manage to theorize 'a successful form of mass culture or mass art' (p. 102). But Fry's stress on the

formal qualities of art, craft, and design objects, as 'expressions of sensibility via form', was significant in the history of aesthetic ideas – all the way up to current analyses of everyday aesthetics. It endowed craft with the status of high culture and rendered it worthy of theorizing. Rose notes that Read and other Marxist critics actually developed Fry's line of thought, 'taking decorative art not just as a fully realized form of abstract art but even as a model for the future of nonrepresentational art as a whole' (p. 103). Rose concludes by returning to post-Greenbergian formalist criticism. In contrast to modernist teleology, formulated by Greenberg, formalist-modernist art is actually repetitive, founded on universal principles that cross generations, styles, and places. This does not mean that formalist-modernism reached the telos of purity of medium, neutral of conventions. It means that dealing with formal conventions, or challenging them, is part of the meta-project of plastic art.

This is a fine conclusion. Indeed, we ought not to forget that formalism is distinguished from other methods of criticism by its focus on the aesthetic qualities of the work itself, and by its willingness *to face the artistic medium*. Formalism does not try to push the medium aside in order to reach a body of interpretation, which is what is done by what Bell called 'weak' spectators – the kind of spectators who, standing in front of something great, cannot cope with its greatness, thus reducing it to 'ordinary emotions of life'.⁵

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

⁵ Clive Bell, *Art* (1914; New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 29.

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